

Information and Communication Technologies in Times of COVID-19

Subjects: **Social Work**

Contributor: Diana Valero , Ana Romea , Carmen Elboj ,

People with mental health problems have considerably suffered during the pandemic because, for many of them, accessing different information resources through telematic means proved to be a great difficulty in their everyday lives.

COVID-19

pandemic

health inequalities

social intervention

ICT

social work

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the worst in the world in memory. It has had obvious consequences on the entire population's physical health but, at the same time, is also causing long-term consequences for mental health ^{[1][2][3]}. For those who already had a mental illness, the exceptional measures taken disproportionately especially affect the most vulnerable groups ^{[4][5]}.

Some of the preventive measures imposed to prevent the spread of this disease, such as social distancing, recommendation or prohibition of large gatherings of people, and above all, home confinements, are those that most strongly impact people's mental health ^[3]. It was indicated that these health crisis situations can lead to isolation for the entire population, decrease physical and mental activity, increase recursive thoughts, aggravate already existing mental illnesses, and augment stress and anxiety disorder that therefore bring about a growing demand for mental health services ^{[6][7][8][9]}.

However, one resilient aspect is how information and communication technologies (ICT) have become allies during this pandemic by favoring social contact, facilitating shopping without leaving home, generating opportunities for leisure and entertainment, allowing telework and tele-education, and transmitting information ^{[10][11]}. Between 2019 and 2020, the time that people spent every day using the Internet on any device increased by 4%, and the use of social networks rose by 13.2% ^[12]. ICT have also been applied to numerous fields, including medicine and mental health, and have proven to be a helpful resource that is demanded by professionals and patients alike ^[13]. However, not all the population has benefited equally from ICT. One of the situations of unique vulnerability is mental health patients. They have faced barriers in accessing ICT, which can lead to double social exclusion due to their health condition and their health difficulties in such access.

2. Access to Information in Times of COVID-19

It was showed that ICT can facilitate people with mental health problems [14]. For example, ICT are helpful for improving these patients' cognitive capacity [15][16], they can be applied to the educational field [17], and they have positive effects on facilitating these patients' social and leisure activity [18][19]. Today, ICT have become an indispensable element in people's leisure time because their use may already constitute a hobby, and they allow people to connect to hobbies of all kinds [20]. Furthermore, connecting people with mental illness to ICT is positive [21], and digital social work can potentially implement innovative mental health interventions [22][23][24].

However, some barriers prevent this group from accessing the use and practice of ICT on equal terms: associated stereotypes [25], the course of their disease itself [26], lack of training in digital skills [27], costs of digital technologies, and no showing interest in using them [28]. It is essential to point out that some barriers that hinder ICT access for people with mental illness can be overcome with appropriate support and adaptations [29].

During this pandemic, the vital role that ICT played in accessing information for the entire population was evidenced [3], including, of course, in the mental health field. Many are investigating the use, benefit, and impact of ICT during the pandemic. For example, messaging apps have been crucial for helping people deal with mental health issues, especially those related to isolation and stress. With them, they have been able to receive information about COVID-19. They are also a good option because their use does not require high digital training, and thus, vulnerable groups can employ them [30][31]. Furthermore, official and social organizations often resort to this platform to send messages with reliable information [32][33].

Social networks have also played a significant role for this group during the pandemic, but their use in mental health may imply certain controversy. It was suggested two positive aspects of social networks for users with mental health problems: some people with mental health problems have utilized social networks to communicate and make their experiences visible, and handling social networks can be an excellent way to face social isolation [34]. However, the idealized image that is often projected on social networks can negatively affect those who compare themselves to others, which increases stress and anxiety [35]. Finally, hoaxes of all kinds can be quickly spread via social media [36][37].

Exposure to the mass media during COVID-19 can increase symptoms of depression, anxiety, and hypochondria, especially in those groups that were already vulnerable to start with [38], including, of course, users of digital media.

Many people have resorted to the Internet and social networks to seek information and to feel specific security. Unfortunately, a considerable increase in hoaxes and deliberate misinformation has made people's mental health worse [39][40], which has evidently worsened the mental health of people with a previous mental pathology [41][42].

According to data, Internet users voice many concerns about fake news: 56% of adults aged over 18 years are uneasy about distinguishing between the real and false news they receive over the Internet, and this percentage rises to 65.1% in Spain [12]. Therefore, administrators must make commitments to provide reliable information to prevent this misinformation, especially for this vulnerable group [43]. For this purpose, health organizations and the third sector of social action have been crucial in preparing documentation and distributing it to its users [44][45].

Basically, insofar as ICT have been used as a means to report the pandemic, a direct and intense relation between inequalities in accessing digital technologies and COVID-19 exposure has emerged ^[46]. This aspect is especially significant for people with mental health problems because, in some cases, the medication they take for their illness affects their cognitive abilities, which makes people more vulnerable to hoaxes ^[47]. This is why it is essential to establish successful strategies when developing programs and policies that allow the population in general, and people with mental health problems in particular, to access information to develop their digital and communicative competence.

Mental health patients have been an especially vulnerable population during the COVID-19 pandemic due to isolation measures, while limitations for interactions can negatively influence their care and care processes. With these confinements, care has been generally adapted for its provision through telematics means, and telecare has been vital for mental health patients ^[37]. Furthermore, telecare reinforces vulnerable groups' access to ICT, which can help to reduce the impact of COVID and exposure to the risks of this disease ^[46]. Moreover, it positively affects their mental health ^[21] and provides educational and leisure opportunities ^[29]. Hence, contributing to develop patients' digital competence is essential, and as part of it, access to information plays a preponderant role.

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